

Ageless Treasure
By TERRY ELLIS
Contributing Editor

At 72, Bobbie Courier is anything but retired. Active in the SGI and her community, she's aiming for her 100th birthday.

In the three-county area of South Florida (from Florida City near the Everglades to Jupiter just north of West Palm Beach) live more than 1 million people who are 60 and older. That's a higher concentration of "elders" than anywhere in the United States — and at any time in human history.

"It's profoundly unlike most human societies have ever been," says Dave Bruns of the Florida Department of Elder Affairs.

Florida also is a model of what's to come as America ages. With life expectancies on the rise, a woman in her 40s will, on the average, live until she's 79. If she's living in Florida, she's likely to be healthier because she exercises year-round and chooses food with an educated eye. And she's less likely to end up in a nursing home. Florida has the lowest percentage of nursing-home beds in the country — 28.6 versus the national average of 53 beds per 1,000 population.

A key to this has been the state's dedicated network of home- and community-based services, which help keep elders independent. For example, about 40,000 volunteers served some 12 million meals last year to seniors, either in their homes or in local community centers. Many of the volunteers are seniors themselves, helping those even older. "It's been a quiet and stunning success," says Mr. Bruns. "It's no joke to say that without them, there would be starvation."

Still, for many, the Florida retirement dream loses its luster when death or illness strikes, and the rest of your family is far away. Sachiko "Bobbie" Courier could have been one of those people. Instead, at 72, she's an example of that other image of life in Florida: A vibrant, active senior who's contributing to her community.

She still works five days a week and dances in her kimono every chance she gets. Four days each week, you'll find her driving to SGI activities. (She's often the one carpooling new members.) She's an active member of the Florida Region's Golden Group (for seniors) and is a guidance staff member for Palm Beach Area, sharing the wisdom she's gained in 30 years of practice. And believe it or not, she still finds time to participate with the local chapter of the Japan-America Society, sharing her cultural heritage with others.

Mrs. Courier prides herself on her independence and strives to keep her three children free from a sense of obligation.

"I did what I was supposed to do as a mother — they have no obligation to me," says Courier, expressing her point of view with a brashness that might take others her age by surprise. "This is very important. Mothers are supposed to raise children — it's the normal thing to do. They don't owe me anything. As long as they're happy, I'm happy.... Children have their own lives."

She carries herself with the strong pride of knowing she raised her children alone after her husband died 20 years ago. And she made sure they got the education they needed to be independent. The courage to do so, she says, came from her practice of Buddhism.

"When my husband died, that's when I honestly became very close to the Gohonzon," says Mrs. Courier. Although she had started practicing back in 1969, it wasn't until the financial and physical responsibility for the family fell on her shoulders that she faced the Gohonzon in earnest.

“I think the most important lesson she taught us was responsibility,” says Teresa Laudenslager, the oldest of Mrs. Courier’s three children. Watching their mother work two jobs, the children learned self-reliance. Teresa, herself, is now the mother of three grown children. She also praises her mother’s devotion to Buddhist practice. “There’s no telling what she would have done after my father died without this religion,” she says. “She is so talented...her activities keep her alive and young.”

Mrs. Courier still is thinking about how to raise young people — those who will shoulder the future. “That is my goal until I die,” she says. “To do that I have to become an example.” And she thinks of her own father’s example.

Mrs. Courier left Japan as the bride of a U.S. serviceman. She was the only member of her family who didn’t practice Buddhism, and when she left, her father was seriously ill. After three heart surgeries, his doctors didn’t give him much chance to live. “He asked the Gohonzon to live until I joined,” says Mrs. Courier, and that’s exactly what happened. Four years later, and one week after she received the Gohonzon, she received a letter that her father had died.

“I have to develop the same compassion for my children and grandchildren that my father had for me,” says Mrs. Courier. “It’s not easy. He put his life into introducing me to this practice. Before I began practicing I never had patience, and when you’re impatient you do things and say things without hesitation. You hurt people that way. Family is family, and they tolerated me. But the members of the SGI have helped me do human revolution and develop compassion. From the bottom of my heart, to develop patience and compassion, that has been my biggest benefit.”

Aiming for her 100th birthday, she’s determined to keep deepening these human qualities, these ageless treasures of the heart. You might say, she is drinking from Florida’s fabled Fountain of Youth. Says Patti Dougherty, a longtime Miami-area youth leader, “Bobbie Courier is the youngest youth division member around.”

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